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Paul Valéry: The Politics of Method

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PAUL VALÉRY (1871-1945) seems to be an unlikely subject for a study in political thought. His credentials as a political commentator are not immediately apparent. Seemingly remote from the controversies of his day, Valéry was an exemplary "art for art's sake" poet who sometimes left an impression of sterile intellectuality. A man who cultivated clarity and austerity of thought, he sought always to refine his sensibility, tempering especially those passions which generate political opinions and partisanship. Wary of the mythic element in history and politics, he remarked that "in the beginning was the Fable." Yet he was far from being detached, either in his love for France or in his loyalty to the idea of Europe. He carefully observed and analyzed the events of his day, taking note of unsettling trends in a handful of essays that span almost fifty years.

Valéry's reputation as one of the great innovators of modern poetry is secured by a fairly small output of verse. The bulk of his writing is prose: plays, dialogues, critical essays, and letters. These works receive considerably less attention, however, than his poetry; and perhaps most neglected of all are the finely crafted pieces on politics and history.

As a writer, Valéry has been credited with considerable originality, but he admired mastery more and considered it to be simply a question of technique. He strove to revise—and so control—his creative inspirations until all that remained of accident was art. Intuition is untrustworthy; artificiality is preferable to unruly experience. So said the public Valéry.

His fanciful creation and alter ego, Monsieur Teste, "was content to think and above all *to observe himself thinking.*"[1] This most improbable being, born of Valéry's dreams of reason, was an adept in the art of selective forgetting, retaining what he needed for tomorrow.

> This man had known quite early the importance of what might be called human *plasticity*. He had investigated its mechanics and its limits.[2]

A youthful Valéry similarly set out to discover the laws of "method": the *ostinato rigore* of an ideal Leonardo. He asked a question put earlier by Nietzsche: What is a man's potential? What sort of mobility is possible in a godless universe? While Nietzsche invoked the *Übermensch*, Valéry directed his attention to the latent powers of the conscious mind, man's "Ego" or "universal self." He did not regard this self as an abstract entity, however; its attributes resemble those of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's living "noosphere." It is the human drama itself.

I

> The things of the world interest me only as they relate to the intellect; for me, everything relates to the intellect.[3]

Valéry often used biblical allusions when referring to his idol, the intellect. His skepticism was of a religious nature. Myth underlies all of our thought; language is a play of brief dreams. Believing as he did, Valéry preferred to choose his own idols.

His attitude toward the things of the world was ambivalent. Politics and history he reckoned as sources of intrinsic fascination, charmingly seductive but dangerous. He showed the same attitude toward method. This is not so apparent in his early essays because the peculiar note of his ambivalence can be mistaken for enthusiasm, an emotion he disdained. He regarded the intellect as a cold, precise instrument. Intellectual precision he characterized as an ailment: it suspends our normal perceptions of reality and, by doing so, irreversibly modifies reality.

Still, intellectual discipline is a source of practical power. The victory of mind over circumstances may be ensured only by methodical application of theory to practice. What we need, Valéry concluded, is a universal method such as Descartes had envisioned. "We have the theory of many a phenomenon, but we still lack the theory of theory."[4] Though Descartes' claim to have discovered this method was exaggerated, Valéry respected him for the effort. For modern man, truth is correlated to his freedom of action over nature. "At the source of this prodigious transformation of the human world it is an 'Ego' that one finds . . . ."[5] The acquisition of freedom and power being simply a matter of technique, Valéry devoted himself to the pursuit of a method.

"The Evening with Monsieur Teste," "Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci," and "A Conquest by Method" were the first fruits of this lifelong project. Then in 1897, reversing a familiar convention, Valéry retired from literary activity to enter government service. For twenty years he published nothing, attending instead to the perfection of his writing technique and the idea of method. He avidly followed current issues in the sciences and mathematics, from which fields he derived much of his poetic method and inspiration. In fact, his poetry has been commended for its analytical rigor and compared to the more geometrical art forms—architecture, music, and dance—which Valéry so admired. Physicians, architects and dancers were characteristic subjects. The Leonardo, Eupalinos, and Faust of his imagination are portrayed as masters of method.

But it is Monsieur Teste who personifies this method at the extreme. Teste is mind masquerading as man, "the demon of possibility." "For the abstract portrait I wanted to make, it was my ambition to give it the qualities which seemed to belong to Degas' drawing . . . . Nothing but that."[6]

Valéry was first of all an artist and a craftsman. As such he brought a singular insight into the critique of method. It enabled him to recognize some of the universal aspects of technique and particularly to inspect the operation of technological means in contemporary politics and commerce.

Concerning the direction of modern technology as a whole, Valéry was at best cautiously optimistic. He grasped the totalitarian drift of social technology long before the political experiments that followed the great war. His admiration for military efficiency and order might have made him susceptible at one time to the myth of benevolent dictatorship. But when he wrote that the political mind reaches the "fullness of its development" in a dictatorship, he meant this ironically. The natural drift of politi-

cal activity appears to favor coercion. Valéry combined the language of Dostoevsky with that of Saint Paul to describe the European situation in 1919:

> By giving the name of progress to its own tendency to a fatal precision, the world is seeking to add to the benefits of life the advantages of death. A certain confusion still reigns; but in a little while all will be made clear, and we shall witness at last the miracle of an animal society, the perfect and ultimate anthill.[7]

This tendency to a "fatal precision" ensues from the conquest of society by method. Europe had already become an intellectual factory. "Thought has to develop and it has to be preserved. It can advance only by *extremes*, but it can endure only by *means*. Extreme order, which is automatism, would be its ruin. . . ."[8] Moreover, method is duplicable. It bestows only a temporary advantage to the regime that marshals the private interests of its citizens to accord with national policy. Rivals can do the same.

II

National rivalry was, in fact, the point of departure for Valéry's 1897 essay, "A Conquest by Method," in which he examined the political implications of such methodical organization. Written in response to fears roused by German industrial and commercial successes, it was his most complete statement of a theory of method. Since he did not append a formal set of Cartesian *regulae* to this or to any of his other works, we must extract the most important elements of his theory from various sources. The basic incentive for adopting method appears to be this: to compensate for what we lack by perfecting what we have.

Valéry had a shrewd sense of the incompleteness and contingency of our perceptions. The world they depict is a fragile, fragmented one. "The wonder is not that things are, but that they are what they are, and not something else."[9] He pressed this idea to its logical extreme, all but anticipating Benjamin Whorf's formulation of linguistic relativism:

> As the consciousness emerges from such intervals [of incomplete information] and from the personal divagations into which it might be led—not only by physical weakness or the presence of poisons in the nervous system, but also by the strength and subtlety of its attention by the most exquisite logic, or by a cultivated mysticism—it comes to suspect that all accustomed reality is only one solution, among many others, of universal problems. It is convinced that things could be *sufficiently* different from what they are without its being very different from what it is.[10]

We create our reality through expectation and habit as much as through conscious design. But in the beginning is always the fable. "Man, I assert, fabricates by abstraction, ignoring a great part of the qualities of what he uses. . .,"[11] says the Socrates of Valéry's dialogues. As *homo faber*, man reshapes matter and himself according to his own standards.

Wide variations are possible within a mind that remains formally identical with itself. The physiology of mind is a limiting factor, but within these limits the possibilities are countless. Perceived reality thus proves to be a convention, another of man's fabrications. The roots of fable go deep.

Valéry scarcely knew what to make of this unsettling idea. He believed it was worthy of careful reflection even if definite conclusions were out of the question. Nevertheless, if we juxtapose his perceptual relativity with this remarks about extreme order, we might understand the nature of his ambivalence toward method, especially in regard to its political applications.

Method, he believed, is an essentially ambiguous product of human thought. Its consequences in practice belie the symmetry of theory. Methodological rea-

soning is abstract and best suited to the limited and definite purposes of pure theory. Practically, we must realize that its application depends on a repertory of perceptions and hypotheses that is fundamentally reductionist. Bias is inescapable, being intrinsic to any limited vantage. Every point of view is false because it is oversimplified. All of this is due to a radical insufficiency in our resources and means, in our ways of knowing and doing.

Although Valéry carried the banner of value-free science, he was too much of a skeptic to regard it as more than an ideal. Method demands definition for the sake of economy or efficiency. The intellect abhors a vacuum, so myth fills the void; the mind creates what it needs. Politics is one such affair of emotions and dreams, of psychic states that dwell in the twilight between "the clarity of life and the simplicity of death." Method, which is born of insecurity, expresses an understandable aspiration to orderly simplicity.

But life resists simplification; it preserves its integrity. If method is primarily an affair of the intellect, organization certainly is not. It belongs to life, not to abstraction. Its patterns may seem simple on paper, but in operation it is a tangle of seeming cross-purposes. Natural substance absorbs it even while being modified by its effects. In practice, organization is as unconducive to rational design as life. The powers that shape it are unconscious and non-rational. What passes for a purpose or design is its tendency to function by simply adapting to changing conditions. Only with man does the impetus to organization attain a conscious dimension. Institutions can be deliberately fabricated, of course, even if not quite to specifications.

Institutional planning is not an unalloyed achievement. Although it is created by man, an organization obeys natural laws, which supervene human control while reaffirming natural necessity. Man is a partner in creation, but not its perfecter; his creation remains incomplete. Still, he can exercise a good measure of practical command over his circumstances.

Many people are convinced that, someday, humanity will possess the knowledge and skills needed to establish a society controlled by rational means. At issue is what we mean by "control." We must first distinguish "rational control," which is a question of possibility, from other forms of manipulation and define its sufficient conditions.

A rational system of control would depend on the selective application of means toward specific ends and an ability to achieve predictable results. It must be conducted scientifically and, like science, its procedures must be duplicable. Otherwise the most elaborate system of surveillance or behavioral modification, however unobtrusive, would fail to meet the conditions for actual control. Even the most sophisticated totalitarian apparatus is subject to natural decay. Adaptability and survival imply flexible initiative. Excessive order—call it bureaucratization—in the absence of actual control renders any system more vulnerable to disruption or collapse from a single, concentrated stroke. This has been evident ever since the advent of global war. "We later civilizations . . . we too now know that we are mortal."[12]

III

Valéry defined method as a regular procedure which includes "*perfect preparation*, a generally adequate execution—and always . . . results."[13] Even defeat provides experience, a "minimum gain." When Valéry first defined his method he still accepted the positivist viewpoint, on which he based his hope for a system of rational social control. But under the influence of the new physics he grew increasingly skeptical of what has since come to be called scientism. He characterized "unpredictability" as the transcendent new fact of modern times; within

its compass traditional empirical science has been relegated to one corner.

> What has happened? Simply that our means of investigation and action have far outstripped our means of representation and understanding.[14]

In place of accepted truths we now deal with probabilities. But rational control must be conscious and purposive. This raises crucial questions. In a world of probabilities can any method enable us to do more than simply influence circumstances and compromise with them? What would result from conscious efforts to control social life? Would society perhaps be subjected to an order independent of conscientious planning or informed consent?

It must be remembered that political organization is first of all a biological phenomenon. Although reason reduces the accidental element and eases this process, ecological adaptation is largely unconscious and non-rational. We cannot purposefully reconstruct particular conditions in the absence of laboratory controls, but these controls are suitable only on a small scale. We can merely probe, experiment, and act on incomplete information. We lack the means to trace subsidiary effects of our actions: elements which are as crucial to the substance of our circumstances as harmonics are to a natural musical tone. Feedback must be regarded doubtfully.

Science is critical, analytical, selective; like man himself it is a continuing experiment. Close political scrutiny does not agree with its purpose. Science is hard-pressed to produce on demand. But this is what rational control would most require: as well as a synthesis of current wisdom, which would be unlikely to yield a complete or consistent picture of reality. Myth will always take a hand. By utilizing the partial truths of science as political guidelines we risk turning them into untruths. As always, activity will compromise with existing conditions. Adaptation fills the gaps in our plans.

Like science, technology should be approached as work in progress. Neither one may be finalized without destroying its vital quality of experimentation. Ideally, experiment should be unconstrained by our resources, although in practice our choices limit our options. Science is more flexible in this respect. The economics of technology are of a different kind. Sunk costs are a major factor; it is expensive to begin again. Vested interests interfere, both by resisting change and by taking advantage of the opportunities of change or cultural lag. Various stages of technological development coexist in the same locale. Invidious comparisons are drawn; more myths are engendered. Political controversy is the inescapable result.

Valéry was particularly concerned about the international consequences of this conquest by method. A political method might serve any master or be employed in ways that aggravate existing rivalries and foster new ones. An alliance of method with myth enlisted in the service of warring economic or cultural interests is especially dangerous to civilization.

> History is the most dangerous product evolved from the chemistry of the intellect. Its products are well known. It causes dreams, it intoxicates whole peoples, gives them false memories, quickens their reflexes, keeps their old wounds open, torments them in their repose, leads them into delusions either of grandeur or persecution, and makes nations bitter, arrogant, insufferable, and vain.[15]

IV

The sources of Valéry's method range from Greek geometry and the Renaissance arts to modern science. Its most important elements include discipline, empiricism, planning, analysis of basic units, regularity of procedure, selective

emphasis, attention to proportion, duplicability, and careful study of results. Two considerations dominate: to minimize the role of accident and to subordinate all functions to the whole effort. Well-defined purposes or ends may be fortuitous. An organization or technique may simply interact with its environment, adopting the purposes most closely at hand rather than riding the vagaries of expectation. Whatever the case may be, Valéry believed that such a method was responsible for Germany's successes.

> Germany owes all to something that is most antipathetic to certain temperaments—particularly to the English and the French. That thing is discipline. It is not to be despised. . . . For a German it is life itself.[16]

> Every undertaking is supported by the whole mass—and that mass is naturally disciplined. Here the social vice of the intelligent, which is refusal of discipline, vanishes. A wonderful instrument remains: disciplined intelligence. And now it is nothing but an instrument.[17]

Valéry felt that, even if his interpretation of current practice was an overstatement, he would nevertheless be supported by the trend of subsequent events. He believed he was witnessing the beginning of method.

The military complexion of this experiment was what probably first attracted his attention and admiration. In his judgment, Field Marshal von Moltke epitomized the system:

> This man became a strategist. He dismissed the military ideas of his time. He took only its scientific ideas and its military progress, combining these with the best strategy of the past—that is to say, with what, to the end of time, it will be rational to do in war.[18]

> For that icy hero, the true enemy was the accidental. He warred against it, and his strength lay solely in method.[19]

The characteristics of an ideal man of method include dependability, a will to work, a capacity for dispassionate judgment and action, as well as what Valéry called "true mediocrity in the individual." The last quality implies "greatness in only the most elementary talents." Such a man is the ultimate functionary: anonymous and dispensable.

These early ideas of Valéry are not far removed from later technocratic proposals by Thorstein Veblen and Ernst Juenger. He was willing to be persuaded, then, by the political advantages that a modern method appeared to offer: "What a curious result, if the results of that new order of things were in every way more perfect, more powerful, more pleasant than we have today."[20]

V

"Today" was still 1897. Valéry welcomed the application of method to the whole range of intellectual endeavor. The secret realms of mind and imagination no longer seemed capable of escaping scientific examination. The spread of technology just might prove more beneficial than not. Optimism seemed reasonable.

In 1919, however, Valéry asked: "Have we some freedom against this threatening conspiracy of things?"

> Perhaps in seeking that freedom, we may create it. But in order to seek it, we must for a time give up considering groups, and study the thinking individual in his struggle for a personal life against his life in society.[21]

Such prescriptions of method for social ills now promoted his distrust. He opposed the underlying spirit of collectivism. By then, political collectivism had ceased to be hypothetical. Totalitarian movements had begun to infect all parts of Europe.

In his earlier study, Valéry had already anticipated the use of psychological techniques of persuasion and the coordination of information-gathering agencies. By catering to the wishes of its

clientele, which it painstakingly analyzed, German industry could turn to advantage its role as the clever servant. Serviceability can be a subtle snare. As Valéry saw it, economic competition was being waged along the lines of a military operation. Its object was to maneuver rivals into positions of inequality. In battle this strategy depends on depth of reserves. Inequality in commerce must be based on cheap prices.

A test of national strength is to undercut rival nations economically. The rapid post-war recovery of Germany and Japan confirms this notion. But competition takes many forms and must be flexible. Advantages won through commercial shrewdness are temporary by nature; balances shift and new inequalities create new competitive fronts. In times of worldwide economic stability, for example, other sources of national power must preponderate. Their instruments may include superior weapons, technical innovations, control of scarce resources, greater internal political consistency, and coordination.

This understanding is supported by Valéry's admirable description of the fiduciary nature of power:

> Power has only the force we are willing to attribute to it; even the most brutal power is founded on belief. We credit it with the ability to act at all times and everywhere, whereas, in reality, it can only act at one point and at a certain moment. In short, all power is exactly in the position of a bank whose existence depends on the sole probability (incidentally, very great) that all its clients will not come at once to draw out their deposits. If, either constantly or at any particular moment, a certain power were summoned to bear its real force at every point in its empire, its strength at each point would be about equal to zero . . . .[22]

Valéry believed that brute force and large size would again be favored after contrived inequalities became more difficult to defend due to the duplicability of their means. Europe's historical advantage was disappearing; method had become the equalizer of the world's regions. Factors such as climate, resource base, situation along ancient trade routes and population characteristics need no longer decide the question of national or regional power.

Valéry's appraisal, then, indicates that methodical coordination of national life is inaugurated for reasons of external politics. By contrast, Simone Weil, in her reflections on war, suggested that these considerations are not foremost:

> The great error of nearly all studies of war . . . has been to consider war as an episode in foreign politics, when it is especially an act of interior politics, and the most atrocious act of all.[23]

Certainly the international situation aggravates the conditions that promote a closer involvement by the state in its affairs of its citizens. But the very complexity and discord of national life reinforce this drift toward more wide-ranging intervention by the state. Governments attempt to regulate conflict and manage problems caused by social discontinuities. Political problems come to be seen as problems of technical feasibility.

VI

A crisis of the intellect, particularly a crisis of civilized expectations, followed the Great War. The century that had begun so hopefully was now scrutinized through jaundiced eyes. The promised peaceful region of a progressive, scientific order stood discredited in the judgment of many thoughtful people. Old myths were thrown over during the war. Valéry observed that "science is morally wounded in its moral ambitions and, as it were, put to shame by the cruelty of its applications.[24]

Yves Simon characterized the mood of that period as a counterfeit pessimism. Genuine pessimism, he wrote, is not so

bitter, not so scandalized by what it witnesses. What Simon saw, instead of serene acceptance, was the disillusionment of an unrealistically optimistic faith in progress, which had minimized or altogether overlooked the evil in human designs.[25] Various flavors of reactionary escapism were indulged: retrospective utopias, medievalism, the myth of inevitable decadence, and myths of ruling elites.

Valéry described the situation as a form of mental disorder: an obsessive rummaging of old ways and old formulae, a desperate search for some magical solution. The disorder manifested by war exhausted Europe's energies; rivalry was being realized in destruction instead of creative competition. Europe's historical position was consequently failing; the ancient geographical balance between the world's regions was gradually being restored. Drawing an analogy with thermodynamic entropy, Valéry pictured this equalization as a perfect state of disorder. The "idea of Europe," he believed, is based on order, combining an intense power of radiation from its central geographical position with an intense power to assimilate physical and cultural forces. But these powers were now being diffused. Valéry wondered what must then become of the genius of the European mind. Would its intellectual strength fall toward zero?

This diffusion of Europe's intellectual power—through the commerce of her "method"—was the "threatening conspiracy of things" of which Valéry wrote. It seemed to him that a leveling of knowledge and technique was near to being accomplished.

> Knowledge is preserved in its full value only if the conditions vital to its increase are present. It must grow or perish; and it can grow only in free minds—a free mind being one strong enough to create first of all its own controls.[26]

It appears that the growth of knowledge and of organization are somehow related; perhaps each nourishes the other. But the problems associated with growing complexity and large scale reduce any prospect of maintaining internal stability. Human institutions must be continually renegotiated or they lapse, sometimes ceasing even to function. The natural gravity of the elements tends toward a state of non-utility; fabrication is an open-ended struggle against drift.

The dialogue between man and nature is mediated by a "second nature," which man has created and animated through his symbol-wielding agency. Our most demanding problems derive from this symbolic universe which fuses minds and means. Culture is once removed from our natural ambience, yet is constantly impinged upon by it. These two worlds must be reconciled; but synthesis leads to further conflicts and contradictions. "Side by side with the real enigmas that face us in things themselves, we find others posed by our own handiwork, by the accumulation of our own creations."[27] Anachronistic survivals are frequently cited examples. But subtler absurdities which escape general attention—new idolatries—bear the profoundest witness.

Knowledge and industry are always provisional: ever in a state of transition as they transform reality. Applications of science precipitate single moments from an ongoing process, thus severing them from their context. Novel contexts and requirements are created, resulting in new "created needs." One of these is our civilized habit of making more work for ourselves:

> What chores! Chores are concealed in comfort itself! Chores that from day to day are only multiplied by our efficiency and our concern for the morrow; for we are caught by the ever more perfect organization of life in an ever tighter net of rules and constraints, many of which we never notice![28]

> In short, in every way we are circumscribed, dominated by a hidden or obvious regimentation extending to everything, and we are so bewildered by the chaos of stimuli obsessing us that *we end by needing it.*[29]

Our reach literally exceeds our grasp. The information explosion has increased our awareness of distant events. Perceptual saturation has become so great a risk that many people have adapted by blunting their senses, by seeking refuge in indifference, or by internalizing conflict in the form of stress diseases. Others thrive on the stir.

Reality is reduced to formula. We try to simplify our lives even while further complicating them. Valéry understood the implications of pseudo-scientific reductionism and suggested possible political consequences:

> There would be a general revolt of feeling in the face of such strict application of perfectly rational data. For it would end, in fact, by classifying each individual, invading his personal life, sometimes killing or mutilating certain degenerate or inferior types.[30]

But Valéry could not answer the question of how to prevent such abuses: not just these specific ones but also other potential abuses. Perhaps the question is unanswerable. All politics imply a certain idea of man; and ideas have consequences. Valéry was particularly struck by the contrast between technical sophistication and our political mystifications.

> The same individual who in physics or biology uses forms of thought as accurate as precision instruments, thinks in politics by means of ambiguous terms, variable notions, illusory metaphors.[31]

VII

The conquest by method has increased the scope of political action. More than ever we need to grasp the economy of political power. Modern communications and transportation are abridging the interval between an event and each link in its series of subsidiary effects. The network of human interaction is taking more concrete shape through the mediation of technological means.

> Actions in finite, well-determined, clearly delimited, abundantly and powerfully linked surroundings do not have the same consequences as they had in a formless and undefined world.[32]

> The age of the finite world has begun.[33]

Valéry came close to endorsing the biblical meaning of "work" and "dominion over nature." The symbolic universe of humanity unfolds in history. Man has defined the world, named its creatures, and elaborated his milieu through work.

> Work is any expenditure of action that tends to make things or creatures or circumstances profitable or pleasant to man, and man surer and prouder of himself.[34]

> Every life necessarily alters the milieu in which it is spent. On the one hand, it depletes its surroundings . . . ; it consumes as it proliferates. On the other hand, it can modify its habitat so as to make it more favorable, richer, more convenient, more regular in production, more bearable in climate; being careful also to give back in some form what it takes for its own needs. . . . A land that has been worked for centuries, then, is a product of acts on the part of life; such land bears the marks of human economy and will; but, in return, both land and labor have reacted upon the owner and laborer.[35]

Cultivated land symbolizes the concreteness of work, even work in its most abstract forms; *homo faber* transforms the larger milieu of persons, ideas, and things by giving it definition. Mutual dependence among people increases in scale and complexity as societal fron-

tiers vanish. The age of exploration has been succeeded by a "period of co-ordination."

> Hitherto, all politics gambled on the *isolation of events*. History was made up of events that could be localized.[36]

> That time is coming to an end. Henceforth every action will be re-echoed by many unforeseen interests on all sides; it will produce a chain of immediate events—confused reverberations in a closed space. The effects of effects, which were formerly imperceptible or negligible in relation to the length of a human life or to the radius of action of any human power, are now felt almost instantly at any distance; they return immediately to their causes, and only die away in the unpredictable.[37]

Valéry emphasized the collective impetus of technology, while noting its tragic meaning for the individual:

> Modern man is sometimes overwhelmed by the number and magnitude of his means. Our civilization tends to make it impossible for us to dispense with a whole system of miracles produced by the impassioned and combined labors of a great number of a very great men and a host of lesser ones. Each one of us feels the benefit, bears the burden, and inherits the whole sum of this age-old capital of truths and formulas. Not one of us is able to do without this enormous inheritance; yet, not one of us is able to carry it out. There is no man now living who can conceive the crushing whole of it.[38]

A loss of material self-sufficiency and a decline in the sense of mastery are two consequences of the proliferation of modern technological means. We live in a machine civilization and depend on it so much that we would be hard put to live outside of it. The most formidable mechanisms, moreover, are "those administrative machines constructed in imitation of the impersonal aspects of the mind."[39]

Although Valéry may have once been attracted by visions of a universal method, he could not ignore the abuses which were typical of practical attempts. Highly organized political systems tend toward conquest and imperialism.

> We are witnessing an attack on the indefinable mass by the will or the necessity for definition.[40]

> This machine will not tolerate less than world-wide rule; it will not allow a single human being to survive outside its control, uninvolved in its functioning. . . . Its precision, which is its essence, cannot endure vagueness or social caprice; irregular situations are incompatible with good running order.[41]

Valéry wrote these words in 1925. He anticipated the rise of an "intelligence class" similar to the technical elites or "experts" Jacques Ellul believes to be the most powerful decision-makers in government today.[42] Valéry criticized the trend toward professionalization because it allows less "play in the machine." Freedom of decision is being circumscribed. "Such a system is excellent for preserving and transmitting knowledge, but mediocre if not bad for increasing it."[43]

VIII

This situation contradicts the "active knowledge" which is the necessary condition for maintaining a technological society. It demands a knowledge that transforms man and his milieu; it must grow or perish. Thought advances only by extremes, but the ruling administrative system seeks to endure through means. It endeavors to establish more static conditions for its more efficient operation.

Active knowledge requires a creative freedom that subsists only in the individual. Everywhere that he looked, Valéry saw discouragement of creativity, sometimes its suppression. The political dilemma, as always, is how to reconcile the

two needs for liberty and order. Liberty is individual; order is collective. Taken to the extreme their demands are irreconcilable. They turn into jealous idols.

People may be discouraged by the unfortunate loss of accustomed liberties; these, however, always change and are seldom what they seem to be. As a result, we may explain away one freedom after another until not one choice seems to be our own. But it is through these very choices that we are most radically and uncomfortably free. Our options may outwardly seem fated, but the dilemmas are real; choice itself is unavoidable.

1.Agnes Ethel Mackay, *The Universal Self: A Study of Paul Valéry* (Toronto, 1961), 85. **2.**Paul Valéry, "The Evening with Monsieur Teste," *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, Bollingen Series 45, Vol. 6: *Monsieur Teste* (Princeton, 1973), 11-12. **3.**Valéry, "Evening," *Works*, Vol. 6, 18. **4.**Valéry, "A Conquest by Method," *Works*, Vol. 10: *History and Politics* (New York, 1962), 64. **5.**Paul Valéry, "Sketch for Descartes," *Selected Writings* (New York, 1950), 205. **6.**Valéry, "Images of Monsieur Teste," *Works*, Vol. 6, 158. **7.**Valéry, "The Crisis of the Mind," *Works*, Vol. 10, 30. **8.**Valéry, "The European," *ibid.*, 314. **9.**Valéry, "Note and Digression," *Works*, Vol. 8: *Leonardo, Poe, Mallarme* (Princeton, 1972), 93. **10.***Ibid.*, 93-94 note. **11.**Valéry, "Eupalinos, or the Architect," *Works*, Vol. 4: *Dialogues* (New York, 1956), 121. **12.**Valéry, "Crisis," *Works*, Vol. 10, 23. **13.**Valéry, "Method," *ibid.*, 53. **14.**Valéry, "Unpredictability," *ibid.*, 69. **15.**Valéry, "On History," *ibid.*, 114. **16.**Valéry, "Method," *ibid.*, 61. **17.***Ibid.*, 52. **18.***Ibid.*, 57. **19.***Ibid.*, 58. **20.***Ibid.*, 66. **21.**Valéry, "Crisis," *ibid.*, 36. **22.**Valéry, "Politics of the Mind," *ibid.*, 106-107. **23.**Simone Weil, "Reflections on War," *Politics* (February 1945), 53. **24.**Valéry, "Crisis," *Works*, Vol. 10, 26. **25.**Yves R. Simon, *Community of the Free* (New York, 1947), 103. **26.**Valéry, "War Economy for the Mind," *Works*, Vol. 10, 471-472. **27.**Valéry, "Politics," *Works*, Vol. 10, 104. **28.***Ibid.*, 111. **29.***Ibid.*, 112. **30.***Ibid.*, 103. **31.**Valéry, "Foreword," *ibid.*, 11. **32.***Ibid.*, 14. **33.***Ibid.*, 15. **34.**Valéry, "Foreword," *ibid.*, 419. **35.***Ibid.*, 419. **36.**Valéry, "Foreword," *ibid.*, 15. **37.***Ibid.*, 16. **38.**Valéry, "Remarks on Intelligence," *ibid.*, 77. **39.***Ibid.*, 78. **40.***Ibid.*, 81. **41.***Ibid.*, 81. **42.**Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion* (New York, 1972), 143. **43.**Valéry, "Remarks on Intelligence," *Works*, Vol. 10, 86.